

**TESTIMONY OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY
IN SUPPORT OF FUNDING FOR THE COMMISSION ON CHILD PROTECTION**

February 23, 2009

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy. The Center is a nonprofit organization based at the University of Connecticut School of Law that provides holistic legal services for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systemic advocacy. Through our Child Abuse Project, the Center represents children in child abuse and neglect cases and provides training and technical support to attorneys who represent both children and parents in these proceedings.

We urge you to maintain funding for the Commission on Child Protection. The Commission's primary mission is to ensure that indigent children and families involved with Juvenile Court child protection proceedings have competent and thorough legal representation to assist them. **Abused and neglected children need and deserve lawyers who have the time, training, and ability to give voice to their needs.**

In Connecticut, we have been able to boast for many years that every child has a lawyer. But the sad truth was that this guarantee of legal representation was not a guarantee of quality and historically many **children received representation that was woefully inadequate.**

The Commission on Child Protection is the most critical tool to address the problem of inadequate representation. Prior to the creation of the Commission, **attorneys were not required to receive training or demonstrate expertise. There were no practice standards and no caseload standards. There was little oversight and no effective system of accountability.**

More importantly, it was not uncommon to hear that children who had been abused or neglected by their parents had never met their attorneys. When their DCF workers failed to get the mental health counseling they needed, didn't bring them to visit their parents, or placed them in inadequate foster homes, they couldn't call their lawyers because they didn't know who they were. Their complaints were never heard by their lawyers and, consequently, never heard by the courts.

The Commission has made tremendous progress in tackling these problems. **The Commission provides accountability and ensures competent representation by mandating that attorneys meet regularly with their clients, ensuring that attorneys have appropriate training, creating standards of practice and enforcing caseload standards.**

The Commission has achieved numerous accomplishments over the past couple of years, all of which serve to improve legal advocacy for vulnerable children.

- **Certification Program:** The Commission spearheaded bringing Child Welfare Law as a Legal Specialty to Connecticut and provided 45 attorneys the means to become certified by the National Association of Counsel for Children.

- ***Pilot Project for Multi-Disciplinary Child Welfare Law Office:*** The Commission issued an RFP for a Multi-Disciplinary Child Welfare Law Office to represent children in child protection proceedings. Two proposals were accepted and implemented. The South Eastern Connecticut Center for Juvenile Justice in Waterford and New Haven Legal Assistance each commenced executing a multi-disciplinary, holistic model of representation for approximately 1000 children on September 1, 2008.
- ***Caseload Standards.*** The Commission reduced maximum caseloads for majority of attorneys to 100 or less. Prior to the creation of the Commission there were no case load standards for attorneys practicing in Juvenile Court.
- ***Attorney Assessment/Application Review.*** The Commission continues to conduct attorney observations throughout the state's Juvenile Courts. Additionally, the Commission reviews all of the renewal applications submitted by the contract attorneys; the Commission conducts reference checks, random case and billing audits, and in some cases interviews.
- ***Mentor Cabinet.*** In collaboration with the Center for Children's Advocacy, the Commission established a Mentor Cabinet with attorney representatives from each Juvenile Court to facilitate dissemination of critical information for effective legal representation in child protection matters.

We urge you maintain adequate funding for the Commission on Child Protection and to reinforce the message that Connecticut's abused and neglected children matter and that they deserve to have a voice.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah Healy Eagan
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 Center for Children's Advocacy